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ABSTRACT

Children may cognitively know that an object of fear is pretend, not real, but still feel fear and anxiety. A review of the development of reality from the psychological and cognitive perspectives shows that the growing child's interaction with mother, family, and environment helps the child gradually develop an understanding of reality. Teachers in early childhood classrooms can help children understand what is real by (1) comforting and making them feel secure, (2) pointing out what is real and what is pretend, (3) giving children experiences in a safe environment, (4) looking at the child's viewpoint and helping him or her look at the viewpoint of others, and (5) understanding the cultural or religious backgrounds of the children. (DR)

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There's a Dragon under My Bed-how
children develop an understanding of real
and pretend.*

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Abstract

How do children develop the understanding of real and pretend both emotionally and cognitively? Classroom anecdotes show that what the child knows and what they feel are not necessarily completed at the same time. The role of the teacher is important in helping children cope with their fears and their understanding of real and pretend.

There's Dragon under My Bed- how children develop an understanding of real and pretend.

I would like to introduce you to Victor. He is tiny for his 3 1/2 years. He has black curly hair, big brown eyes and olive skin. His mother reported when she applied for entrance to school that Victor had been tested at 2 1/2 years and that he was a gifted child. When Victor entered the classroom, it was difficult for him to let his mother go but it was more difficult for his mother to leave Victor. A few months after he entered the school she reported that Victor would be attending a class for gifted children on Saturdays and that he tested at the 5th grade level in reading and at the 3rd grade level in math.

One day in January Victor ran to the opposite end of the room hysterically crying and screaming, "There's a spider, There's a spider". I walked over to the direction from which Victor had just fled. I approached two girls, they laughed, squealed and threw something in the air, trying in vain to catch it. I asked, "Where is the spider that frightened Victor?" With big grins they picked up from the floor a black plastic spider with long floppy legs, the type seen in stores around Halloween. When I saw what had frightened Victor, I went back toward him, which started his hysteria all over again. Even though I explained that I had not brought the spider with me and that it was not a real spider, he could not contain his fear. He retreated from me, saying, "I know but I'm afraid." I assured him again I would not

bring the spider near him while I continued to hold and comfort him. It was a long time before he could quiet himself and even longer before he could find an activity in the room.

Why was Victor, a very bright boy, so frightened, when by his own admission, he knew the spider was not real?

Before we discuss this, let me tell you of another experience I had with children in a school setting.

A community theatre group visited the school to present "Beauty and the Beast". The Pre-K. and K. classrooms were to go to the auditorium at the same time for the cast to talk to the children before the performance. The young man cast as the Beast came out with his beast head in his arm. He allowed the children to see, touch and become familiar with the head of the beast as he put it on and took it off. He told them he was just pretending to be the beast.

Then the play began. When the Beast appeared I had three very frightened children from my four year old class come to my lap for comfort, while my assistant comforted three more.

Why were the children so frightened when they had seen and been told the beast was just pretend? In both situations we see bright children cognitively knowing that the object of their fear is pretend, not real. In both cases we see that their fear and anxiety are genuine. Therefore we know from these anecdotes that what a child knows and what he feels are two different things.

One can define a distinction between the internal or intrapsychic world and the external world of children.

Before I say anything more about these experiences, I would like to review the development of reality from psychological and the cognitive perspectives. I will limit my remarks on psychological development to those as expressed in the early writing of S.Freud, and more recent writings of Eric Erikson, Daniel Stern, Robert Emde, D.W.Winnicott and others. My remarks on cognitive development will be from the writings of Jean Piaget, L. S. Vygotsky and Ginsberg and Oppen. In both areas I will endeavor to keep psychological and cognitive jargon to the minimum, to avoid confusion of terms.

Charles Brenner (1974) asked, "How does a sense of reality develop?" He said, "We believe that it develops gradually, like other ego functions, as the infant grows and matures over a considerable period of time." He went on to say that at first the infant cannot tell which stimuli are from within and which are from the environment. Eventually the child develops the capacity to do so, for a part of the general function of reality testing is the ability to tell whether something is "self" or "not self". In the young child this capacity is only partially developed. Therefore, the tendency of the child to experience the spider as real and the beast as harmful is because the child has not completed the process of ego development.

Erik Erikson, (1980) mentioned three indispensable components of the maturing sense of reality. The first one is

factuality, or the world of facts. Example: This black plastic object is called a spider. The second is contextuality, a coherence and order of facts into a context. This truth value is shared by all using the same words and the same image for that which is significant. Example: This black plastic spider is not alive. This black plastic spider cannot move by itself. This black plastic spider cannot hurt you. The third component is actuality, a realization that allows a group or an individual to share the same realization to form an actualization. Example: This spider is a black plastic spider that is used for fun and to pretend. By combining these three components of reality the child can adapt and feel at home with his environment.

Victor, of our first anecdote, delighted me a few months after the experience with the spider when he came up to me in the play yard. He put his clenched fists out to me and said, "Guess what I have in my hands?" I made a few wild guesses and then asked him to tell me. He opened his fists to reveal a large piece of shredded rubber tire in one hand and several small pieces of the tire in the other. He said, "This is a mother spider and these are the baby spiders."

S.Freud (1911) took us from the Pleasure Principle to the Reality Principle. This is not a one step process. It is a slow, gradual, process in which the child learns to balance his wishes for immediate gratification against the demands of the environment for postponement in favor of higher goals. Freud

marks the end of the domination of the pleasure-principle with the psychological detachment from the parents.

Zilboorg (1941) said he felt the opposite of play was not work, but reality. The child borrows the objects and circumstances from the real world, not only for mastery and control, but for a temporary self-assertion over the object. He said, "One is tempted to say that in this period the child constantly takes bites out of reality; it is tasting rather than testing." Reality is not correlated or synthesized for the child until well into the latency period, along with the integration of the ego and the superego.

These foundations of early theory of the mental life of infants laid the groundwork for newer studies. Today the research in mother-infant studies with the help of modern technology gives use new understandings. Robert Emde (1980) writes that the past two decades brought new information from a multidisciplinary view. We now know that the infant is active, socially interactive and organized. The infant seeks stimulus and participates in its own development. Experiences serve to build on preexisting states of organization. Developmental shifts occur and effect new behavior changes in social and emotional life.

Daniel Stern (1979) talked about some of these studies. He points out that for the first six months the infant is in the perceptual and motor modes. In the first few weeks the infant's visual field is limited to about eight inches, which is the distance from the caregiver to the cradled infant during feeding.

When the infant is nursed or fed, the infant gazes at the human face. In about six weeks there is a big shift, for the infant is able to fix on the mother's eyes as well as to widen and brighten his eyes in gazing. This brings about a new level of interaction between mother and child, for the mother now feels that she is connected or if she was connected before she is now more completely connected to her infant. At about three months the infant can see at a more distant focal range, as well as motorically move its eyes and head to follow mother as she moves around the room. By six months the child is ready to move from the face, voice and touch to an increasing interest in objects for reaching, grasping and manipulating. This bring about a three way relationship, mother, infant and objects.

Facial expressions are at first reflexes, but it appears that facial muscle maturity is partly integrated at birth. The smile is seen as early as the first two weeks during dreaming, sleeping and drowsiness. By six weeks the smile is produced by external stimuli and around three months the infant uses it to receive a social response from others. During the first six months the infant is learning and interacting with the human world. This world is the world of the family and is a source of stimulation. The infant is developing the skills of coping with social interaction. Gazing, head movement, and facial expression are the infant's repertoire for their part of this interaction.

It is the reaction to strangers at about nine months that brings about the beginning of object permanence. With this

reaction, the infant is becoming aware that the relationship with mother is separate from its own self. It is the joint contributions between the mother and the infant that allows the infant to regulate its own internal states. These states include feelings of increase or decrease of excitement, pleasure or a loss of pleasure, well being, or emptiness, to name a few.

It is not known how the child integrates these feelings, but it is believed that each unit of experience is strung together and experienced over and over again. This allows the infant the opportunity to internalize each unit as a separate representation. Stern says, "One important implication of this formulation is that there can be no representation without an affective component. Schema on the other hand, can be formed from sensori-motor experiences alone." Piaget's work on the formation of schemas is still one of most influential works. Let's take a look at this work .

Ginsburg and Oppen (1979) listed four factors stated by Piaget that are important influences on the development of intelligence. These are: 1. Biology, physical structures with which the child is born.

2. Experience, by observation and manipulation.

3. Social Transmission, information from reading and instruction.

4. Equilibration, an active balance with its environment.

Piaget's intellectual development is divided into four major periods. Sensorimotor (B-2yrs.), Preoperational (2-7yrs.),

Concrete Operations (7-11yrs.) and Formal Operations (11-adulthood). I will focus on the first two periods since this is the age span important to our understanding of the development of reality. The explanations of the first six stages will be very brief, bringing into view only the barest idea of the stage in order to see how one stage builds on the next.

The Sensorimotor period is divided into six stages.

Stage 1-(B-1mo.)

Piaget pointed out that the newborn is not a helpless creature. In the first stage the infant's learning is confined to its reflexes (the mechanisms provided by heredity). The sucking reflex (and others) are not activated by external stimulus alone. The infant depends on reflexes for interaction with the environment. He learns to seek the nipple and search for it. After the nipple, the infant will suck on its hand or fingers and then suck on any object close to its mouth such as blankets, toys or your fingers etc. However, if hungry the infant is very selective.

Stage 2-(1mo.-4mo.)

In this stage, Piaget presents the notion of the primary circular motion. This is the ability to bring the hand to the mouth. The child also learns to anticipate. When the lips are touched, it initiates sucking behavior. In this stage the infant begin to show some curiosity, and imitates behaviors. This

rudimentary imitation is limited to vocal, visual and grasping behaviors. At this stage the very basic rudiments of object constancy are seen. The infant continues to look for a short time after the object is out of its view.

Stage 3-(4mo.-10 mo.)

In this stage the infant's interests go beyond its own body. The phrase Secondary Circular Reactions describes the new found ability to recreate an action. The action starts out with no goal in mind, followed by an attempt to make it happen again.

Stage 4-(10 mo.-12 mo.)

The child's behavior is even more organized. Goals are united with actions. The child will select a rattle instead of a ball. Or, if he wants a ball and a box is in the way, the infant would use a remembered scheme to obtain the ball. Piaget said the infant's behavior at this stage is for the first time truly intentional and therefore "intelligent."

Stage 5-(12 mo.-18 mo.)

The climax of the Sensorimotor period is the period called Tertiary Circular Reactions. The infant is now more mobile, walking allows him to search for novelty. He also develops more complex methods of searching for objects which have disappeared.

Stage 6-(18 mo.-2 yrs.)

This stage forms the transition to symbolic thought. The child decenters from the self. The infant now sees things existing independently. The infant moves from the undifferentiated state to a separation of self and its environment .I would like to point out that according to Piaget this separation is earlier and different than is the separation individuation phase as defined by Mahler,Pne and Bergman.Piaget is talking about the child looking for, or knowing that an object exists when it is out of sight. Mahler speaks of retaining a mental image of the object, that is the caretaking adult, even if she is not visible or near the child.

Pre-operational child-(2 yrs.- 7yrs.)

According to Piaget, the child of two to four years, forms mental representations which stand for absent things. From the examination of objects through his sensory modes the child forms mental symbols. The child's reasoning is of three types. One type is the simple situation which the child has experienced before. If one puts on a sweater, it is because one is going out. In the second type, the child's desires can distort his thinking. John brought a thunder cat figure to school and allowed Peter to play with it. Later John asked for it back and Peter would not give it to him saying, "It's mine." By questioning Peter and John, Peter said, "He gave it to me." John said, "I told him he could play with it." It's the same as wishing makes it so. It is also common for children of this age level to help themselves to whatever

they want. It doesn't matter if it belongs to someone else or the school. It is not stealing at this period. The third type Piaget calls "Transductive" reasoning. I see this in the classroom often, particularly in the younger children who have limited experiences with other children. Jay, a three year old, played with the tricycle on the first day of school. When another child wanted to use it later in the day, or even the next day, he cried, "I had it first".

Piaget felt language was important in forming the child's thought, but that it does not shape all the child's mental activities. The adult's language forces the child, to some degree, to consider the world from a new perspective. The child changes the language to fit its own mental structures. It is important to remember that the adult's language does not immediately socialize the child's thought. Mature thought comes about after a long process of development. Language is only one part of this process.

At this age symbols or words do not stand for things, but for the child's knowledge and experience of things. I was riding on an El train in Chicago. Behind me was a mother with a young child of about two years. When the train stopped at a station, they saw a large picture of a lion in an advertisement. The child said to her mother, "Doggie, doggie." For an older child, the picture might represent a lion, or another zoo animal or it, might be a lion that is a zoo animal which is frightening as well. Symbolic play makes up a large part of the child's activity and provides

an adjustment to reality. With symbolic play the child assimilates the world around him into his own needs and desires. The child can then shape reality to his own requirements. Symbolic play is essential for the child's stability and adjustment to reality.

A common pattern in the younger child is his inability to deal with several aspects of a situation. As the child grows older he is able to consider more than one point of view. Piaget says the child is able to decenter. The newborn acts as if he is the center of the world. The young child thinks he is the center of the world. Both must learn to decenter. The infant, must decenter its actions and the young child, must decenter its thought. As the child comes in contact with differing views and social situations, he goes through the process of decentration. This must take place before mature thought is possible.

So when we look at either the psychological or the cognitive framework we see these children in the middle of a process. When Victor of our example was frightened, it really didn't matter how well he read or how much math he could calculate. Emotionally he was still founded in the animistic period where everything has life. The children reacting to the Beast head were still taking "bites out of reality" and reacting to what they saw, as what is real.

Let's look at what part the teacher plays in this process. Since the development of the child is a long psychological and cognitive process, it is necessary for teachers in the early

childhood years to be part of this development. We need to be their "Ego Strength". We need to help them in their development of reality by:

1. Comforting and making them feel secure.

example: (A.) The first day of school Jay took the red fire truck from the large wheel toy area and rode it for the whole play time. He repeated this for several days in a row. One day he came to school to see that Bobby was using the red fire truck. He ran over and pulled on Bobby, shouting and crying that it was his fire truck. The teacher held Jay, explaining to him that the truck was for everyone but now it was Bobby's turn. Jay could have his turn when Bobby finished. The teacher then found another truck for Jay to use while he waited for his turn.

(B.) It was the day the health department conducted the vision and hearing screening. I sent the children in small groups to the nurse's office. If a child did not want to go, I explained again what was going to happen. I then took them by the hand and said , "I will go with you so you can see what is going on. If you don't want to look at the pictures in the viewer, you don't need to." Most of the time they will watch their friends and participate in the screening.

2. Pointing out what is real and pretend.

example: (A.) A group of four children were in the housekeeping corner. The table was set with plastic dishes and utensils as well as plastic fruit,vegetables and meat. The cups

were filled with water from the sink, which is used to wash the dishes and anything else. I saw that the children were putting the pretend food in their mouths and drinking the water in the cups. I entered the area and explained that the food was not real and that they must just pretend to eat it. I also said the water was not clean and was for washing, not drinking. Sometimes it is even a good idea to give children some real food like crackers, and a container with clean water, for drinking.

3. Giving them experiences in a safe environment.

example (A.) The example I gave in the housekeeping corner is one area in which a child is given an experience in the classroom. Group time is another, a real and pretend piece of food can be examined for attributes of pretend and real. An artificial and real lemon could be felt, tasted, smelled, and looked at and the likenesses and differences listed.

(B.) One of my pet gripes is the celebration of Halloween in preschools. Yes, children do begin to separate the real from pretend by experiences in a safe place, however, I feel that the classroom is not always the place for costumes. Teachers must very carefully evaluate their groups and the individuals in their groups, before planning this holiday. I have had several experiences with children, parents and teachers which indicated the adults were unaware of the effects of their behaviors on the children. One year I saw a teacher dressed as Big Bird. No one else was in the room except a three year old boy crying. As the

teacher approached him he cried harder, for he didn't know who or what was approaching him. Another time a mother came to pick up her child when she was dressed as a witch with a false nose and black paper on some of her teeth. The child refused to go with the "witch" for she would not believe it was her mother.

One teacher was careful to dress so the children could recognize her, however, when she donned a Doctor's coat with a stethoscope around her neck, one child said, "Look Mrs. Larson is a Doctor now." The same sort of thing happened with a baseball uniform. The child's response was, "Girls can't be ball players." Other holidays with imaginary symbols can also be confusing, such as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. How many times parents take a child to sit on Santa's or Bunny's lap for a snap shot, without regard to the stage of development of the child. All they end up with is a picture of a crying, upset child.

(C.) Another classroom experience is the reading of books and story telling. There are numerous books and stories that are well known and beneficial such as There's A Nightmare in my Closet or Where the Wild Things Are to name two. It is important when these or other books are read to allow time for the children to talk "about the dragons under their beds." These books give the children an opportunity to do this. Books are a very beneficial method of expanding experiences but be sure you read them first and evaluate the message you are giving.

4. Looking at the viewpoint of the child and helping them look at the viewpoint of others. example: (A) Andy cried loudly and informed me that Billy had hit him and he didn't do anything. I asked Billy why he hit Andy. He replied that Andy had kicked him. I turned to Andy and said, Billy said you kicked him and that hurt him and that is why he kicked you. Through his tears he replied, "No it didn't hurt me." Needless to my role was to explain the reality for Andy that it does hurt others even if you can't feel it yourself.

5. Looking at the cultural or religious backgrounds of the children which might be different from our own. example: (A) In our school we have had experience with both Christian Science and Jehovah's Witness students. I'm sure you have had children who have had restrictions placed on them for cultural or religious reasons also. This makes their reality different than ours. It is our role to let all of the children know about each other, for this is one part of the process of reality for all.

In summary, let me say that psychologically the sense of reality develops gradually. An infant cannot tell which stimuli are from the inside and which are from the outside. Part of this ability comes from the child's sense of "self" and "not self." This gradual process is brought about as the child interacts with the mother, the family and then his environment. It is these joint contributions of interactions that allows the infant to regulate its internal structures. Reality is not totally

incorporated in the child until well into the latency period which is approximately seven to eleven years.

Piaget states that the infant's basis of reality is related first to bodily actions, and only later, through a gradual process, is the infant able to elaborate this to thought. Concrete action precedes and makes possible the use of intellect. The infant is not passive, but instead interprets, constructs, and assimilates experiences, giving meaning to events aiding the development of his own reality.

Finally, I would like to remind you of the story of "The Emperor and His New Clothes." it was so important for the Emperor and his ministers to function around their fears of being unfit for office, or impossibly dull, that they ignored reality and the Emperor rode through town without clothes. Educators of children should remember, even in adulthood our view of reality is constantly influenced by our wishes, fears, hopes and memories.

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